



File Code: 1950

Date: August 17, 2015

Scoping Notice

Fightingtown Creek Wildlife Habitat Project

Dear Forest User:

You are receiving this letter because you have requested to be notified of such proposals or you may own property immediately adjacent to National Forest lands where the activity is being proposed. We are seeking your input and encourage you to participate by providing your comments and suggestions on this proposal.

The Conasauga Ranger District of the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests is requesting public comments on a vegetation management project in the Fightingtown Creek drainage. The objective of this project is to increase wildlife habitat diversity in that area. Proposed activities are tentatively scheduled to begin during 2017.

We are inviting you to submit comments to help refine the proposed activities disclosed in this letter. In addition, the Responsible Official is currently preparing an environmental analysis of this proposal and needs your assistance to better identify issues, concerns, and opportunities. Pursuant to [36 CFR 218.7\(a\)\(2\)](#), proposed project activities to be analyzed under an environmental assessment (EA) are subject to §218 subparts A and B.

Project Area Location and Description

The analysis area for this project is located in Fannin and Gilmer Counties, Georgia, and lies within the Fightingtown Creek drainage. The area encompasses approximately 5,075 acres of National Forest System lands located in Compartments 680, 681, 682, 683, and 684 (see Figure 1, attached). The majority of the area is comprised of mature forest on steep, north- and east-facing slopes between 2000 and 3500 feet elevation. White pine and mixed mesophytic hardwoods dominate the area.

Background

The Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests is divided into areas (or zones) called Management Prescriptions (MRx). The goals and emphasis of management for lands allocated to each prescription are different, providing for a variety of outputs, services, and values to be managed across the National Forest. Lands within the Fightingtown Creek analysis area are allocated to four MRx. Those within the Fightingtown analysis area are listed and described briefly in Table 1.



Table 1. Management Prescriptions in the Fightingtown Creek project area.

| MRx | Name and Description | Acres | Percent of Analysis Area |
|--------------|--|--------------|---------------------------------|
| 4.D | Botanical-zoological areas <i>Management emphasis is the conservation of significant elements of biological diversity (Forest Plan p. 3-71).</i> This 153 acre area on the upper slopes of Flat Top Mountain was designated as a botanical area due to rare plant populations. | 153 | 3% |
| 7.B | Scenic corridors and sensitive view-sheds <i>Management emphasizes the provision of high-quality scenery in sensitive recreational and travelway settings (Forest Plan, p. 3-119).</i> A corridor along Forest Service Road 64 (Three Forks) was designated as a major arterial road with outstanding views. | 252 | 5% |
| 8.E.3 | High-elevation, early-successional habitat <i>Management emphasis is sustaining a distribution of early-successional habitat at high elevations (3,000 feet and higher) (Forest Plan, p. 3-145).</i> A small area on Flat Top Mountain was designated with this MRx due to its elevation and history of management. | 93 | 2% |
| 9.H | Management, maintenance, and restoration of plant associations to their ecological potential <i>Emphasizes management, maintenance, and restoration of plant associations to their ecological potential. The focus should be on 1) communities in decline, 2) communities converted from historic composition by land uses, 3) communities on ecologically appropriate sites but unable to maintain themselves, and 4) communities infrequent on national forest but not regionally rare (Forest Plan, p. 3-167).</i> The objective is to utilize active management to restore or maintain healthy forest communities in order to support viable populations of plants and animals associated with these communities. The majority of the project area falls within this MRx. | 4,577 | 90% |
| Total | | 5,075 | 100% |

A complete list and detailed description of each MRx on the Forest can be found in Chapter 3 of the [Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan \(Forest Plan\)](#). The Forest Plan describes desired conditions for each MRx, and provides **Forest-wide** and **MRx** goals, objectives and standards that are used for guiding the management of the National Forest. When differences between the existing and desired condition for an area are identified, management opportunities exist for moving the area towards the desired condition.

Purpose and Need

The purpose of the Fightingtown Creek Project is to move the existing resource conditions in the project area towards the desired conditions in a manner consistent with the goals and objectives outlined in the Forest Plan.

Existing conditions in the Fightingtown Creek Project Area indicate a need and opportunity to increase wildlife habitat diversity by maintaining a range of successional forest habitats, including early-successional habitat and old growth. This is consistent with:

Forest-wide Goal 2 - *A diversity of habitat will be provided for the full range of native and other desired species. Sufficient amounts of interior or late-successional habitat as well as early-successional habitat will be provided to meet needs of all successional communities. Early-successional habitat will be well distributed in all forest types, elevations, aspects, and slopes including riparian corridors (Forest Plan p. 2-4).*

MRx Objective 9.H.01 - *Manage forest successional stages to maintain a minimum of 50 percent of forested acres in mid- to late-successional forest, including old growth; a minimum of 20 percent of forested acres in late-successional forest, including old growth; and 4 to 10 percent per decade in early-successional forest.*

Until recent decades, forest management in the Fightingtown Creek project area produced a diverse mixture of successional stages resulting in abundant native wildlife, including a notable local ruffed grouse (*Bonasa umbellus*) population. A lack of forest management activities in the project area for several decades has resulted in the loss of early-successional stage forest habitats (ESH). ESH includes patches of young forest which provide important habitat attributes for wildlife, including a diverse food source, nesting, and escape cover. These benefits are ephemeral and disappear as young forests begin to mature and canopies close over time. Currently, over 82 percent of the project area is comprised of mid-late successional forest, two-thirds of which is older than 80 years old. This large, contiguous block of mature forest also provides important wildlife habitat, however, species requiring ESH face continued decline without interspersed patches of young forest. ESH is created through natural disturbances, such as tornadoes, or through controlled forest management that mimics natural processes in the absence of such disturbances. This lack of a diversity of successional stages of forest habitats is not limited to the Fightingtown Creek project area. Breeding bird survey data from across the eastern United States show that ESH-dependent birds continue on steady and significant downward trends due to the limited availability of this important habitat condition (Hunter et al. 2001).

The current and desired successional stage communities in the project area are displayed in Table 2.

| Table 2. Successional stages within the Fightingtown Creek project area. | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|----------------------------------|---------|-----------------|-----|--------------------------|---------|---------|-------------------|---------|---------|
| MRx (acres in Analysis Area) | Early Successional Habitat (ESH) | | | | Mid to Late Successional | | | Late Successional | | |
| | Desired Range | Current | Desired | | Desired Range | Current | Desired | Desired Range | Current | Desired |
| | | | Min | Max | | | | | | |
| | | | -----Acres----- | | | | | | | |
| 4.D (153 acres) | N/A | 0 | 0 | 0 | N/A | 153 | 153 | N/A | 102 | 102 |
| 7.B (252 acres) | 0-4% | 0 | 0 | 10 | 75% | 228 | 189 | 50% | 176 | 126 |
| 8.E.3 (93 acres) | 10-17% | 0 | 9 | 16 | 20% | 93 | 18 | 10% | 93 | 9 |
| 9.H (4,577 acres) | 4-10% | 0 | 183 | 458 | 50% | 3,688 | 2,289 | 20% | 3,038 | 915 |
| TOTAL | | 0 | 192 | 484 | | 4,162 | 2,649 | | 3,409 | 1,152 |

The information in the table above demonstrates that the distribution of successional stages in the Fightingtown Creek project area is not consistent with objectives in the Forest Plan, especially within MRx 9.H. There is no ESH in the project area, and there is a surplus of mid-late and late successional stage forest.

There is a need to create from 192 to 484 acres of ESH in the Fightingtown Creek project area.

Existing conditions also indicate a need and opportunity to designate a percentage of the project area as blocks of old growth habitat in order to meet Forest Plan goals and objectives, such as:

Forest-wide Goal 20 – *Provide a well-distributed and representative network of large, medium and small potential old-growth blocks in the Blue Ridge Mountains and Southern Ridge and Valley ecological sections.*

Objective 20.1 - *Reserve 5 percent of each 6th level HUC (subwatershed) that has at least 1000 acres of National Forest in management that will conserve existing, or provide for the development of future, old growth.*

Currently, neither of the two Fightingtown Creek 6th level watersheds (HUC# 060200030204 and HUC# 060200030205) contain designated old growth or old growth-compatible MRx's that meet this objective.

There is a need to designate approximately 400 acres within the two watersheds as old growth.

Proposed Action

Timber Harvest – Approximately 436 acres (17 stands) are proposed for a combination of commercial and noncommercial timber harvest. The majority of overstory trees in these stands would be removed, and the stands would be allowed to naturally regenerate. These stands are dominated by mesic deciduous hardwoods or white pine (*Pinus strobus*) and would likely

regenerate to the same species. A portion of the trees (minimum of 15 ft² per acre) would be reserved from cutting. These trees would be retained in a non-uniform and variable distribution and would remain on site indefinitely. Long-lived species such as white oak (*Quercus alba*) would be selected as reserve trees to be retained.

The following stands are proposed for regeneration:

| Compartment | Stand | Current Forest Type | Acres | Management Prescription |
|--------------------|--------------|---|--------------|--------------------------------|
| 680 | 05 | (56) yellow poplar-white oak-northern red oak | 20 | 9.H |
| 680 | 08 | (56) yellow poplar-white oak-northern red oak | 33 | 9.H |
| 680 | 09 | (03) white pine | 13 | 9.H |
| 680 | 13 | (03) white pine | 16 | 9.H |
| 680 | 14 | (56) yellow poplar-white oak-northern red oak | 26 | 9.H |
| 680 | 22 | (56) yellow poplar-white oak-northern red oak | 25 | 9.H |
| 680 | 39 | (56) yellow poplar-white oak-northern red oak | 54 | 9.H |
| 681 | 13 | (56) yellow poplar-white oak-northern red oak | 35 | 9.H |
| 681 | 15 | (50) yellow poplar | 22 | 9.H |
| 681 | 18 | (56) yellow poplar-white oak-northern red oak | 56 | 9.H |
| 682 | 04 | (56) yellow poplar-white oak-northern red oak | 13 | 9.H |
| 682 | 07 | (56) yellow poplar-white oak-northern red oak | 46 | 9.H |
| 682 | 21 | (56) yellow poplar-white oak-northern red oak | 11 | 9.H |
| 683 | 01 | (56) yellow poplar-white oak-northern red oak | 15 | 9.H |
| 683 | 10 | (56) yellow poplar-white oak-northern red oak | 12 | 9.H |
| 684 | 15 | (56) yellow poplar-white oak-northern red oak | 18 | 9.H |
| 684 | 31 | (56) yellow poplar-white oak-northern red oak | 21 | 9.H |
| Total | | | 436 | |

Old Growth Designation – To meet old-growth allocation objectives in the project area, over 400 acres would be designated for old-growth conservation through small block allocations (i.e. less than 100 acres block size). Stands that best meet four defining criteria described in the Region 8 Old Growth Guidance would be selected for designation as old-growth: 1) those that most nearly meet minimum age requirements, 2) no obvious human disturbance, 3) minimum basal areas of stems greater than 5 inches diameter at breast height (dbh) and larger, and 4) the dbh of the largest trees.

Associated Road Activities–

Road Reconstruction: This activity includes minor reconstruction needed to widen segments of existing Forest Service System roads to improve access to the proposed vegetation management activities. Road reconstruction activities could include: widening of roadbed surface in curves, removal of vegetation in roadbed surface, improvement of drainage structures (culverts, lead-off ditches and rolling dips), spot surface placement of gravel, and erosion control.

Road Maintenance: Road maintenance activities would be conducted on segments of existing Forest Service System roads utilized for the vegetation management activities included in this proposal. Activities could include surface blading, brushing of roadside vegetation, spot placement of gravel, maintenance or improvement of drainage structures, and erosion control.

Forest Service Roads proposed for minor road reconstruction or maintenance are described in Table 4.

| Table 4: Forest Service Roads proposed for minor reconstruction or maintenance | | | | |
|---|-----------------|----------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| FS Road No. | Name | Mileage | Minor Reconstruction | Maintenance |
| 792 | Williamson Cove | 4.5 | Yes | Yes |
| 797 | Hickorynut Gap | 3.0 | Yes | Yes |
| 798 | Porter Mountain | 0.8 | Yes | Yes |
| Total | | 8.3 | | |

Temporary Access: An estimated 1.7 miles of temporary roads would be needed to gain access to the stands proposed for vegetation management activities. Of these, an estimated 0.4 mile would be considered new construction, while the remaining miles would be considered betterment of existing roadbeds established from previous management. Activities associated with temporary road construction could include: removal of vegetation, brushing of roadside vegetation, surface blading, spot placement of gravel, improvement or installation of drainage structures, erosion control (including reclamation of sites), and closure once harvest and associated activities are completed.

How to Comment

Specific written comments as defined by §218.2 should be within the scope of the proposed action, have a direct relationship to the proposed action, and must include supporting reasons for the responsible official to consider. It is the responsibility of all individuals and organizations to ensure that their comments are received in a timely manner. While comments will be accepted any time, to establish standing for objection eligibility, scoping comments must be received by September 18, 2015.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record on these proposed actions and will be available for public inspection. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered; however, anonymous comments will not provide the agency with the ability to provide the respondent with subsequent environmental documents. A 30-day Notice and Comment period will be provided at a future date (§218.24). Only those who respond to this request for comments will remain on the mailing list for this project.

Specific written comments must be submitted to: Jeff Gardner, District Ranger, Conasauga Ranger District, 3941 Highway 76, Chatsworth, Georgia 30705, fax (706-695-1872), office (706-695-6736). The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered comments are: 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. and 1:00 to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Electronic

comments must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), or Word (.doc, .docx) to: comments-conasauga@fs.fed.us.

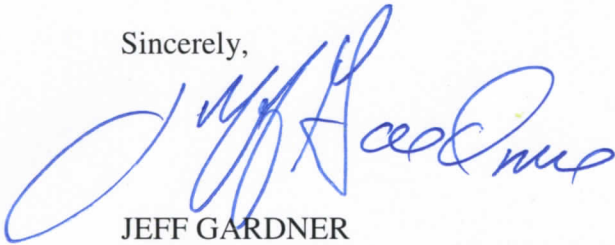
An objection period, if required, will follow the regulation found in §218.7. For objection eligibility (§218.5), only those who have submitted timely, specific written comments during any designated opportunity for public comment may file an objection. Issues to be raised in objections must be based on previously submitted specific written comments regarding the proposed project and attributed to the objector, unless the issue is based on new information that arose after a designated opportunity to comment (§218.8(c)).

Please state "Fightingtown Creek Wildlife Habitat Project" in the subject line when providing electronic comments, or on the envelope when replying by mail. Additional information on the Fightingtown Creek Project is also available on the webpage:

<http://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=44961>. If you would like more information or have questions relating to this proposal, please contact Ruth Stokes, Wildlife Biologist, by email at rbstokes@fs.fed.us or by phone 706-695-6736 extension 105.

Thank you for your interest in the management of your National Forest.

Sincerely,



JEFF GARDNER
District Ranger